

## BRIEFING NOTE

### WHY URBAN BIOSPHERE REGION STATUS FOR GREATER VICTORIA?

#### **What is a UNESCO Urban Biosphere Reserve (Region)?**

A Biosphere Region is characterized by important urban areas within or adjacent to its boundaries where the natural, socio-economic and cultural environments are shaped by urban influences and pressures and are set up and managed to mitigate these pressures for improved urban and regional sustainability. In Canada we use the term “region” rather than “reserve”.

#### **What are the main functions of urban biosphere region?**

They are conservation, development and logistic support. An urban biosphere reserve is expected to contribute to the conservation of its landscape and ecosystem and foster both economic and cultural development. It supports demonstration projects, environmental education and training, and research on sustainable development issues.

#### **What is the value of a UNESCO Urban Biosphere to Greater Victoria?**

A Biosphere organization provides international moral force to habitat conservation initiatives and an organization framework to coordinate the initiatives of the several hundred local institutional, civil and corporate actors in the region. It can receive moral and technical support from the national and international networks of Biosphere Reserves.

#### **What are the main characteristics of a biosphere?**

Each biosphere reserve is organized into 3 interrelated zones, from lowest to highest human influence on nature.

#### **How many Biosphere Reserves are there today?**

There are **738** Biosphere Reserves in **134** Countries. There are **19** in Canada. There are **3** in British Columbia and **2** on Vancouver Island.

#### **What is the status of Urban Biosphere Reserves?**

Brighton, England, is marking its 10<sup>th</sup> year of designation. Ottawa, Canada; Melbourne, Australia; and Kandy, Sri Lanka, are exploring Urban Biosphere Reserve designations.

#### **What are the key elements that make a Biosphere work?**

- **Strong local government support**
- **Clear sources of funding** – ideally long-term, sustainable funding, both private and public
- **Mapping existing stakeholders** to make sure they work collaboratively
- **Cross-sector partnership** with key local stakeholders (schools, universities, charities, energy companies, etc)
- **Setting clear, realistic goals** – conservation of nature and culture, sustainable social and economic development, and research and education
- **Communications** – Communities working together, the UNESCO Brand adds value to the existing projects that are being delivered locally by partners.

#### **Where do we begin?**

The organization process starts with creating a Community Roundtable, which works with local government to assemble the nomination documents.

#### **Do we have a timeline?**

The Canadian Association of Biosphere Reserves (called “Regions” in Canada) will be hosted by the Nanaimo Malahat Biosphere Region group in August 2026. This could be the target date to submit our nomination papers.

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#### **Capital Regional District (CRD) Biodiversity and Environmental Stewardship Service**

In 2025, the CRD established a regional Biodiversity and Environmental Stewardship Service to coordinate a regional approach to biodiversity, protection of ecological assets, and environmental stewardship. The Service can support a Greater Victoria UNESCO Urban Biosphere program by facilitating research, environmental stewardship strategies, and collaborative partnerships with local governments, First Nations, landowners, government agencies, and community groups. Core considerations are the Urban Biosphere Region's unique natural, socio-economic, and cultural environments.

#### **Natural Environment**

Greater Victoria is home to the highest concentration of rare species in Canada, three federal Migratory Bird Sanctuaries, and nine Key Biodiversity Areas, significant contributors to global biodiversity.

Most of the CRD lies within BC's Coastal Douglas-fir (CDF) biogeoclimatic zone: the smallest, most populated, and most at-risk zone in the Province. It contains Garry Oak and Arbutus ecosystems, unique to Canada, and found only along a narrow sliver of urbanized coastline around the Salish Sea. Situated in the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains, the CRD experiences a cool Mediterranean climate with mild, wet winters and warm, dry summers. Mediterranean climates are rare, covering less than 3% of global land area.

Greater Victoria is also home to over 300 major watersheds. They funnel surface and ground water into streams, wetlands, shorelines, and the ocean. These watersheds provide food, habitat, and shelter for wildlife species that define the character of Vancouver Island, including salmon, eagles, and orcas. Our watersheds are also an essential part of urban infrastructure. Sustainably managed natural and urban watersheds are necessary to supply our drinking water, filter pollution from impermeable surfaces, and provide stormwater management and temperature regulation during extreme heat and flood events.

#### **Cultural Environment**

Indigenous peoples have stewarded the lands and waters of Greater Victoria for thousands of years and continue this work today. The CRD has committed to Reconciliation and is taking measurable steps towards a better relationship with Indigenous peoples. An Urban Biosphere Region can support this commitment by restoring and enhancing the health of CRD lands and waters. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) serves as the framework for these actions.

The Ləkʷəŋən ( Xʷsepsəm/Esquimalt) community has given the organizing committee permission to use the name Camossung for the Urban Biosphere. Camossung was a Ləkʷəŋən girl whose story about the Gorge Waterway teaches us the importance of place and caring for nature. That spot is now marked by the statue of Camossung in Gorge Waterway Park.

#### **Socio-Economic Environment**

An Urban Biosphere Region can foster economic development that is socio-culturally and environmentally sustainable, which enhances the quality of life and collective pride in Greater Victoria. Greater Victoria's "natural environment" is constantly voted as the best thing about living in the region in the Victoria Foundation's annual *Vital Signs* survey.

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Biodiversity also drives the CRD economy through tourism, outdoor recreation, and educational institutions, which bring billions of dollars and over 60,000 jobs to the local economy. Local universities and colleges offer world-leading research in climate, earth and ocean sciences, Indigenous studies, biology, and environmental research programs. “Natural attractions” on land and water are also a primary focus for visitors to Victoria and Vancouver Island, according to reports from major travel industry publications, Destination Greater Victoria, and the Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce.